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Artists focus on built environment

Written by Makoena Pabale
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Urban Concerns brings together curators, artists, students and ordinary citizens from Johannesburg and the Swedish city of Umeå, who are seeking solutions to the challenges of living in cities.

A MUTUAL love of art and an interest in urban life have united artists and curators in Johannesburg and Sweden, who were spurred to set up Urban Concerns.

The project focuses on questions regarding humans and the built environment, and the complexities of community dynamics in public spaces.

It is collaboration between the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) and Bildmuseet Gallery, in Umeå in Sweden.

According to the [Urban Concerns' website](#), "The project approaches art from an activist's perspective, redefining the role of the artist as a social and political agent with an ability to facilitate change."

Changes

To be carried out throughout the year, it will raise issues like developments and changes in urban space, people's relation to and experience of public space and the city.



Sweden's Sharlene Khan explores aspects of urban life in South Africa, like this stall for informal trading



Explaining the initiative, Khwezi Gule, the contemporary collections curator at the JAG, said, "Through research, the project aims to not only involve artists but individuals, institutions and communities."

Practical, everyday aspects affecting urban life, such as communication, commerce, urban planning and transportation, social and public spaces, are the project's main focus. In looking for solutions to challenges facing cities in these areas, an investigation has been undertaken on how elements of urban life relate to the socio-political realities of democracy, gender and class.

As part of this investigation, specific activities are taking place at the JAG, the Drill Hall and Joubert Park.

At Joubert Park is the Green House, which has an

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South Africa's BJ Engelbrecht looks at practical, everyday aspects of urban life

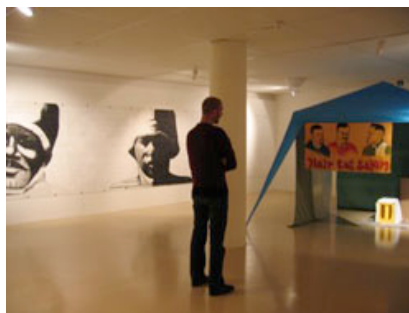
outreach programme to encourage people to grow plants. There are also workshops at the Drill Hall that focus on the bicycle as a viable mode of transport.

Ismail Farouk, an urban geographer, is partnering with JAG on the project. He has researched several aspects of urban life - what city people do with their waste; the kinds of business found in the city; and who are the people running those businesses.

Differences

While the initiative is a joint venture, there are differences in approach in the two centres. "The manner in addressing Urban Concerns, methods of investigation, approach and implementation of the project in Umeå and Johannesburg naturally take different forms due to specific local realities and contexts," explains Michelle Harris, the curator of Urban Concerns.

At the Swedish launch of Bildmuseet Urban Concerns on Saturday, 19 January, South African artist Sharlene Khan held her first exhibition in Sweden. "The show includes her installation Two Fish and Five Loaves and the wall piece (B)LACK, two works that take as their starting point city life in the metropolises of South Africa, discussing the presence of informal economies as well as questions related to immigration and xenophobia," reads the website.



Barber stalls like this are a common feature of the Joburg landscape

Another participant, Swedish artist Daniel Peltz, worked with students in Umeå to set up an on-line video dialogue between young people in the two cities.

RACA, Danish graphic designer Puls Ravn and Swedish architect Johan Carlsson, is also participating through an installation called The Hub, which serves as a meeting place and information centre for Urban Concerns. The Hub is found at the JAG and the Bildmuseet. It is used as a chatroom for South African and Swedish participants to communicate, as well as a gallery for them to post their art.

Urban Concerns will soon launch an art magazine that will be distributed for free.

For more information on Urban Concerns, contact the JAG on 011 725 3180/81 or visit the [Urban Concerns website](#).

The Johannesburg Art Gallery is in Klein Street, Joubert Park.

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